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The art of playing God

On Theology and Video Games. The case of "Metro Last Light"

FRANK G. BOSMAN

"He will live. So that's what forgiveness is. Thank you I'll remember this." Before you lies the semi-conscious body of your Pavel Morozov. You just attached a filter to his gas mask to ensure that he will live to see another day. It is the year 2034, just over twenty years after the cataclysmic ending of World War III: an all-out nuclear conflict leaving Earth a toxic dust bowl, crawling with mutated, highly-aggressive mutants, and only accessible while wearing gas masks. 50,000 Muscovites managed to find refuge in the subway system under the Russian capital, fighting among themselves for dominance over the remnants of humanity. If life elsewhere has continued too, nobody knows: as far as the metro dwellers are concerned, they are the last ones of their species.

You have a very complex relationship with Pavel: the odd couple saved each other's lives on numerous occasions, until Pavel showed his true colours, betraying you to the Red Line, the in-game continuation of Communist Party, and hunting you down to take your life personally. This now all lies behind you. And whatever he has done to you, you choose to save him. A little "Dark One", a member of a sapiens species developed from humanity after the nuclear war, is observing you closely and comments on what you just did: "He will live. So that's what forgiveness is. Thank you I'll remember this."

And then, it strikes you. Above the cupboard Pavel is lying against, a vague painting is visible. It is an icon of Jesus Christ, or rather, the icon, the "Mandylion", the arch-icon of Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox traditions. The icon – like most icons – looks you right in the face. Without any sound or movement, it has judged you and the choice you just made. "Well done, my child," it seems to silently quote Luke 6:35-36, "love your enemies and do good. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." And by this judgement, you, the player of the game *Metro Last Light* (2013), become an icon too, an icon of God in a world otherwise devoid from any transcendent hope.

In this – very substantial and lengthy – article, I take this scene from Metro Last Light as an example of a cultural theological perspective on religion and video games, in which video games – as part of our larger, secular, contemporary society and defined in terms of their unique communicative quality of having a necessary "entanglement" between player and avatar – can be considered a genuine locus theologicus ("theological finding place") of the continuous self-revelation of the Christian God as Creator, Saviour, and Whole-Maker. This article's secondary goal is to give an overview – for both (postgraduate) students and academic colleagues – of the status questionis regarding video games, religion, and theology.[1]

Because of this secondary goal, I will start with a short discussion of what video games are and provide a definition that incorporates both ludic and narrative elements. I will also argue for the unique communicative characteristic of video games, the player-avatar entanglement (section 1). Next, I will discuss multiple perspectives on the relationship between religion and video games, especially that of the (Christian) churches and their vocal adherents, that of the peculiar genre of the "Christian games", and that of the religion and video game

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scholars (section 2). Following from the assessment regarding the lack of theological perspectives on video games, I will argue in favour of a cultural-theological one, framing video games as a locus theologicus, a "finding place" of God's continuous self-revelation (section 3). After that, I will return to our case study, the video game Metro Last Light, its accompanying "Genesis trailer", and – to a lesser degree – its sequel Metro Exodus (section 4). At the end of the article, I will provide some final thoughts.

1. WHAT IS A VIDEO GAME?

The construction of a definition of video games seems much easier than it is, especially if we remember that games have greatly differed among themselves in the past half a decade. The medium is old. We have to come up with a definition that includes the grandfather and -mother of the games, Pong (1972) and Tetris (1987), while at the same time leaving enough room for modern day games such as Cyberpunk 2077 (2020) and Baldur's Gate 3 (2023). Tetris used between 20 to 30 kilobytes, depending on the system used. Baldur's Gate is approximately 80 gigabytes to store, making it four million times bigger than the original Tetris. Diane Carr observed already in 2006: "What they have in common may in fact be rather less interesting or important than the ways in which they differ."[2]

1.1 Video games as ludo-narrative texts

As for my own definition, I want to suggest something rather different: games are ludo-narrative texts, digitally mediated. I will discuss the constitutive parts of this definition one-by-one, beginning in the middle. A video game is a "text", that is, it communicates (however troublesome and imperfect) a message (however inconceivable, objectionable or cryptic in nature) from a sender to a receiver. And because it

communicates, it can be interpreted as such. In the case of video games, we have one or more developers sending a message through their video game to one or (hopefully) far more players of that same game.

Video game "texts" are both ludic and narrative in nature. This runs back all the way to the 1990s' so-called "ludology-versus-narratology debate", which may either have subsided or is still lurking, depending on how you ask.[3] The debate focused on the fundamental question as to whether video games should be considered (primarily or exclusively) to be ludus ("play" or "game"), or (again primarily or exclusively) to be narratio ("narrative" or "story").[4] If a video game is ludus, the appropriate way to study it is through game studies, but if they are narrationes, literary studies is the preferred academic context. Some games such as Pong and Tetris again do not have much of a story, while "walking simulators" such as Everybody's Gone to the Rapture (2015) or The Beginner's Guide (2015) are more interactive stories than games in the usual sense of the word.

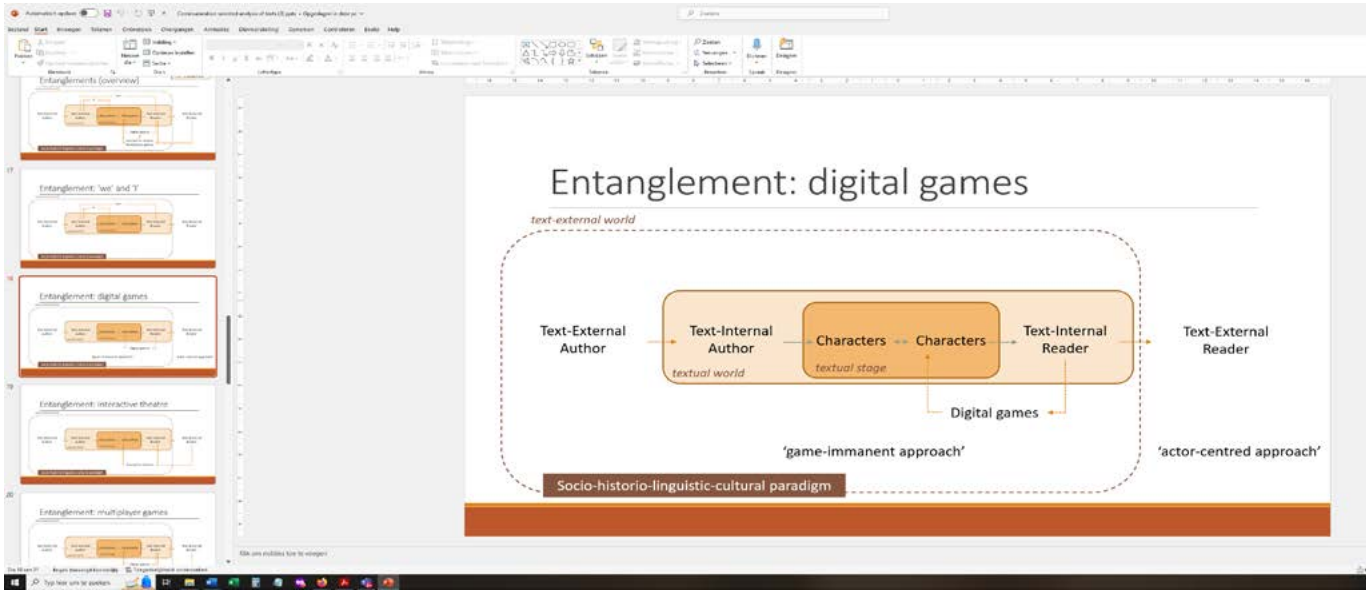
If both elements are in synchronisation, things are fine, but if not, a ludo-narrative dissonance occurs. A "ludo-narrative dissonance" is a disjunction between what a game asks the player to do, and the narrative it is trying to tell the same player.[5] Or otherwise formulated, "a semiotic mismatch between play and narration".[6] Some games do feature such dissonance, while others such as Spec Ops. The Line (2012) and The Stanley Parable (2013), seem to explicitly focus on the dissonance itself. In my definition, video games have to incorporate (at least a bare minimum of) ludic and narrative treats, that means, they have to be interactive (no input = no game), if they want to be more than traditional, non-interactive texts, providing the reader/player with a story he/she can only passively witness; and they have to convey something of a narrative, if they want to be distinguished from discursive or descriptive texts such as manuals and syllabi.

Lastly, video games are digitally mediated texts. Video games have a digital "nature", they need a computer to exist in the first place, whether that is a pc, a home console, a mobile phone, or an arcade machine. This distinguishes video games from "tabletop" games, which humankind has had for millennia, including Go, Chess, and Checkers, but also Dungeons and Dragons or Catan. These games do not need electronic devices to function, even though they have and combine ludic and narrative elements. It also distinguishes video games from other analogue games such as Football, Baseball or Charades, which have ludic and may or may not have narrative elements, depending on your view of what "the game" in question exactly is: A competition or a story.[7] To complicate things even more, both tabletop and analogue games have their digital counterparts nowadays: Baldur Gate 3 for Dungeons and Dragons and FIFA 23 (2022) for football. Nevertheless, video games have to be mediated digitally to qualify as such.

1.2 Communicative entanglement

Now, video games, as a medium of itself, has one very distinctive and equally important communicative characteristic (see Scheme #1). Earlier, I already established that video games are "texts", a communication between a sender and a receiver, or in their case, between a developer and a gamer. But texts have, in fact, two different authors and two different readers alltogether. I will explain with the help of the "Communication-oriented method of text analysis" or COMTA.[8] The COMTA is fundamentally a method of (intratextual, intertextual, and intermedial) text analysis, relating the text-external and text-internal communication of any given text or group of texts.

Scheme #1



The communication-oriented method of text analysis.

The COMTA differentiates between the different "instances" involved in the text's communication.

- The text-external author (TEA) and reader (TER) are people of flesh and are positioned outside the text itself. In the case of video games, the TEA is the game's developer(s), while the TER is the individual player on his/her pc, console or mobile device. Scholars who focus their academic efforts on the TEA/TER are said to use an "actor-centred approach" of video game studies.[9]
- The text-internal author (TIA) and reader (TIR) are non-physical entities, only existing within the confines of the given text. In the case of video games, the game's TIA and TIR are within the game itself. Scholars who focus their academic efforts on the TIA/TIR are said to use a "game-immanent approach" of video game studies.[10]

- The TEA, TIA, and TIR necessarily share one and the same sociolinguistic-cultural paradigm, thus functioning as a set of possibility conditions of the text's existence and communication in the first place. In the case of video games, these conditions include basic knowledge of how to operate a pc or game console (technical), the basic principles of gaming, in general, and of the particular game's genre specifically (ludic), and basic knowledge of established video game tropes (narrative).

In terms of communication, video games inhibit a specific communicative characteristic: The TIR is necessarily entangled with its avatar character, by which it can interact with the game world. Think of Lara Croft in Tomb Raider (2013), The Lone Wanderer in Fallout 3 (2008) or Link in The Legend of Zelda. Tears of the Kingdom (2023). This entanglement means that – and that is unique to the medium of video games – the game's story is told by the TIA to the TIR (as is happening in all texts), by the TIR (in as far allowed by the TIA), and about the TIR (being entangled with a character under the TIA's control). Pay attention, the connection between TIR and its avatar is (necessarily) that of entanglement. But the connection between the TER and his/her avatar is that of emotional connection, which is made possible by the voluntary identification of the TER with the TIR. In short, in video games, the player's avatar equals the player itself.

2. MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND VIDEO GAMES

In this section, I will look at three perspectives on the relationship between religion and video games: (1) the perspective of the "official" church officials (notably from the Roman Catholic side); (2) the perspective of the genre of "Christian" video games, and (3) the

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2.1 Ecclesiastical attitudes

In 2007, the then Pope Benedict XVI, in his speech for the 41st World Communication Day:

> Any trend to produce programmes and products - including animated films and video games - which in the name of entertainment exalt violence and portray anti-social behaviour or the trivialization of human sexuality is a perversion, all the more repulsive when these programmes are directed at children and adolescents.[11]

"Video games take people's lives," the website Bible Reasons warn us at the beginning of a short reflection on what the Bible tells us about playing games under the heading.[12] "While some of these things may not be bad in and of themselves, they become idols if they distract us from our first love," the site Got Questions – "Your questions, Biblical answers" – provides.[13] Those Catholic Men website is slightly more optimistic: "[N]otwithstanding the dangers, video games aren't all bad." And Aaron Earls from Lifeway Research even warns pastors not to disqualify games and gamers because of their effectiveness to procure redemption: "Those who play video games may be in situations that are nearing sin, but the warnings of those who mocked them without warrant will go unheard and unheeded."[14]

There is no love lost, seemingly, between institutionalized religion, especially Christianity in the Western context, and video games. "Church people" may be very sceptical of the religious virtue of gaming, while many games – in their own turn – are very religion critical in tone and content.[15] In games such as A Plague Tale. Innocence (2019), the

Assassin's Creed game series, Blasphemous (2019), Far Cry 5 (2018), and The Binding of Isaac (2011), the faithful servants of the Lord seem to be depicted as a power-hungry and corrupt lot of people.[16]

Certain video game series such as Bayonetta (2009-2022), Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball (2003), or the Mass Effect series (2007-2012, 2021) incorporate explicit erotic content and portray non-traditional sexual relationships.[17] These depictions have generated strong objections from some Christian gamers.[18] While discussions surrounding the "over-sexualization" of female protagonists in video games have been a prominent topic in recent years, often accompanied by criticism of these games for their adherence to traditional heteronormative norms, it is important to note that traditional sexual ethics hold significant importance for many Christians. Consequently, these gamers feel compelled to critique such games as being morally objectionable and contrary to Christian values.[19]

Furthermore, Christian game critics have frequently raised concerns about a perceived link between video games and elements such as magic, occultism, and demonic influences. This apprehension can be traced back to the moral panic that emerged around tabletop games such as Dungeons & Dragons in the 1980s. Specifically, role-playing games such as World of Warcraft (2004) and the Devil May Cry series (2011-2020) are still associated with concerns about violence and demonic themes by conservative Christians.[20] The notion of a "moral panic" surrounding the potential for violent and demonic influences in video games is rooted in the outdated belief that these games primarily target children and teenagers, who are presumed to be more susceptible to influence than adults.[21]

Christians have expressed concerns regarding video games, due to their potential to contain blasphemous or sacrilegious elements. An infamous example of this is the 'Manchester Cathedral incident' of 2007.[22] In the video game Resistance: Fall of Man (2007), the storyline unfolds in an alternate 1950s setting where alien creatures, referred to as the Chimera, are invading Great Britain. Notably, one of the game's levels is set within a digital representation of the Anglican Manchester Cathedral. Given the backdrop of contemporary Manchester, which grapples with real issues of gun violence, and the fact that the violence is depicted within a sacred place of worship, Anglican authorities vehemently called upon the game's publisher, Sony, to address this matter.

Another instance of a video game provoking the ire of religious adherents is exemplified by Fight of the Gods (2017).[23] This game allowed deities from various prominent world religions to engage in battles to

establish their supremacy. Among the featured deities were Egyptian Anubis, Nordic Freyja, Greek Zeus, and other figures such as Jesus, Mazu, Moses, Buddha, and even Santa Claus. Notably, the game did not include the founder of Islam, Mohammed. Of particular interest, when a player selected Jesus as their character, the Son of God would symbolically descend from the cross by breaking it into fragments, with some pieces remaining affixed to his hands, serving as oversized fighting gloves. Subsequently, Fight of the Gods faced bans in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand following its release.

2.2. Christian video games

I define 'Christian games' as commercially released video games, explicitly appropriating the (Western) Christian tradition, including the Bible and its reception, usually (but not exclusively) for the (implied but possibly not realised) purpose of providing faith-appropriate content for children and young adults, and/or proselytizing non-believers.[24]

The self-identified Christian gamer-cum-host of Monkastery Studios, a YouTube "channel intended to provide productive and constructive feedback to the entertainment industry, and ultimately to inspire creators to honor God in all they do", provides a couple of reasons for the bad reputation of Christian games.[25] According to Monkastery, the general "production quality is bad", because Christian developers are inexperienced, use free assets, and do their development job on the side instead of professionally. Next, the "gameplay is bad", leading to Monkastery's outcry that "Christian video games just seem to be unable to lock on to the fundamentals of what actually makes games fun." And furthermore, especially older Christian games are just rip-offs of regular commercially released ones and focus way "too much on message" (resulting in being "too preachy").

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Zachery Oliver, another self-identified Christian gamer, identifies four problems with the genre's popularity.[26] First, games for the faithful have suffered from Wisdom Tree's legendary bad games, riddled with "blatant plagiarism of established game ideas (...) [and] illegal cartridge production/lockout overrides," setting a bad reputation for the whole genre. Secondly, Christian games tend to focus almost exclusively on their narrative dimension at the cost of their ludic quality, often resulting in a ludo-narrative dissonance.[27] Thirdly, Christian games appear to "exist purely for the purpose of evangelizing," sacrificing all subtleness in the zealous effort accompanying this. And fourthly, the explicit religious self-identification of Christian games paradoxically scares away (a sub-set of) their supposed target group, the non-believers.

THE FIRST DECADE: 1980s

The history of Christian (digital) games starts in 1982 with a row of five BibleBytes' productions released for the TRS-80 Micro Computer System, one of the earliest mass-produced home computers. The games were grouped around the Biblical figures of Moses (Moses' Rod, The Exodus Game, and Mana from Heaven), Noah (Noah's Ark), and Daniel (Daniel & The Lion's Den).[28] But the oldest Bible game still available for play is Red Sea Crossing, an extremely rare Atari 2600 game, developed by Steve Stack and published by Inspirational Video Concepts on 31 December 1983.[29] As the story goes, the only 100 copies ever produced were not sold per retail store, but only through mail order. The game was thought to be lost entirely, until it turned up on a 2012 auction selling for €10,400.[30] The game is exemplary for the era of 1980-1989, so it is worthwhile to discuss the game a bit more in depth.

In 1983, it sold for $34.95 and was, as far as we know, exclusively advertised through the 7 October 1983 issue of Christianity Today (see image right). The advertisement read: "Now a video game based on the famous bible story, Moses Crossing the Red Sea (...) enjoyable for the entire family. This inspirational gift is not available by stores." The accompanied photograph shows two children playing the game, while a third is reading through a colouring book, supposedly included in the package, together with an explanatory audio cassette narrated by famous American actress Dale Evans Rogers.

The game itself plays like a primitive side-scroller that goes on indefinitely, as many games in the early days did.[31] The player controls a crudely drawn and rather ethnically stereotyped Moses, dressed with cloak, staff, and kippah. Moses has to cross the titular Red Sea (Genesis 14) by jumping over all kinds of obstacles and hostile sea creatures. The snakes among Moses' foes are a possible reference to the creatures' numerous

appearance in the Torah, for example Exodus 7:8-13 or Numbers 21:6. Once in a while, Moses will find a special object, floating in the sky, drawn in black and white. When touched, it disappears, suggesting Moses picked it up. Within this narrative context, the object is either depicting two stone tablets with writing on it, a representation of the Ten Commandments, given to Moses later on in the biblical story (Exodus 20), or two Torah rolls, representing the Mosaic Law (Torat Moshe) itself, traditionally attributed to Moses.[32]

THE SECOND DECADE: 1990s

The second decade of Christian games – the 1990s – is defined by the Wisdom Tree library.[33] Since then, the whole genre of Christian games has been associated with these games and its accompanying bad reputation. The history of the company is bizarre but well-documented.[34] American game developer Color Dream succeeded, in 1989, to bypass Nintendo's 'lock out' chip, through which the Japanese company could control the international market for their console: only officially licensed third party games could be played on the Nintendo Entertainment Set (NES). Color Dreams' solution was technically reasonably impressive, but in practical terms somewhat disappointing, in the sense that cartridges were known to malfunction randomly, and the overall quality of the unlicensed games such as King Neptune's Adventure (1990), Pesterminator (1989), Metal Fighter (1991), Crystal Mines (1989), and Menace Beach (1990), was suboptimal to say the least.

In 1991, Color Dream reinvented itself as Wisdom Tree, focusing exclusively on Christianity-related games. As co-owner of the company, Brenda Huff, stated,

> [b]asically, what we were doing was taking the garbage out

> and putting Bible content in. That's the whole reason for the company to begin with. We marketed almost 100 percent into the Christian bookstore market, not through secular channels. It took a while to get in. We got picked up by Focus on the Family, which gave us pretty much of an industry okay.[35]

This move was partially inspired to bypass Nintendo's wrath: even though the Japanese company had not sued Color Dreams – partially because such a claim would eventually fail – Nintendo forced its retailers to sell only licensed products. Wisdom Tree was supposed to wiggle the company's unlicensed products into a brand new market: the Christian (book) stores. This had two advantages: the Christian retailers would not sell official games anyway, and any juridical or public backlash from Nintendo against a Christianity- and Bible-focused publisher would make for very bad publicity indeed. To underscore its Christian undertones, as a logo, Wisdom Tree used a cross from which two branches of green leaves float, echoing the early Christian identification between the Tree of Life from Eden with the cross Jesus Christ died on.[36]

This tactic, motivated by commercial motives exclusively, resulted in eight commercial releases by Wisdom Tree on the NES, and one on the Super Nintendo (SNES), the overall majority being Bible games, if not in a very loose manner. Most of the games were rip-offs of popular, officially licensed video games such as Super Mario. Bros (Nintendo, 1983), The Legend of Zelda (Nintendo, 1986) or even Wolfenstein 3D (id Software, 1992), or just modifications of their earlier Color Dream's products. The Wisdom Tree Library consists of Bible Adventures (1991), The King of Kings (1991), Exodus. Journey to the Promised Land (1991), Joshua & the Battle of Jericho (1992), Spiritual Warfare (1992), Bible Buffet (1993), Super Noah's Ark 3D (1994), and Sunday Funday (1995).

Super Noah's Ark 3D is a clear conversion of Wolfenstein 3D.[37] The story of this perhaps best known Wisdom Tree game – the only unlicensed game for the SNES ever – starts with the game company's founder Dan Lawton and his appreciation of the 1987 supernatural horror film Hellraiser (Clive Barker).[38] Lawton saw 'kabalistic implications' in the film, and Color Dream acquired both the license for a NES Hellraiser game for € 50,000, and the Wolfenstein source code for an unspecified amount of money. According to a now debunked internet myth, id Software handed Wisdom Tree their source code for free, because of their supposed anger towards Nintendo, that forced id Software to censor the SNES version of their game heavily, in order to get the Japanese seal of approval.

The Hellraiser NES game was never released because Color Dream failed to engineer their 'super cart' with

which help the older console would be able to run far superior games, because id Software published their next mega hit Doom (id Software, among others released on DOS and SNES, 1993), and because the whole Hellraiser idea would conflict with the company's new family-friendly and Christian image. What Wisdom Tree produced instead was not an original Hellraiser NES game, but a Christian conversion of Wolfenstein 3D for SNES.[39]

All Wisdom Tree games suffer from ludo-narrative dissonances, in different shapes and forms. The games are clearly designed to be platformers or shooters, while the Christian message is uncomfortably smashed on top of it. Usually, bullets have been swapped for 'W' representing the Word of God (Exodus and Joshua), urging the antagonists to repent of their sins before passing on to the next life (Spiritual Warfare), or for slingshots throwing berries at animals making them sleepy. Scrolls are used for (extra) lives (Noah's Ark), adding to the player's total if he/she can answer Biblical trivia questions (Bible Adventures and King of Kings), not infrequently totally unrelated to the game itself (Bible Buffet).

The 1990s were also the decade of the CD-i games such as David and Goliath, Moses. The Exodus, and The Story of Samson (all by Interlight in 1992). These games' inferior quality, however, may be attributed, at least partially, to the technological difficulties of the system itself and the massive competition it received from the much more popular Sega CD system.

THE THIRD DECADE: 2000s

The third decade of Christian games takes almost exclusively place on the PC market (some excerpts left aside), probably because programming for one of the consoles (Xbox since 2001, PlayStation 2

since 2000, Wii since 2006) is a much harder task, especially for part-time developers.

From the perspective of Christian games, the 2000s decade was dominated by the game Left Behind. Eternal Forces (Inspired Media Entertainment, 2006) and its sequels Left Behind: Tribulation Force (2008), Left Behind 3. Rise of the Antichrist (2010), and Left Behind 4: World at War (2011). The games are based on a series of sixteen novels with the same name written by the American Baptists minister Tim LaHaye (1926-2016) and American author Jerry Jenkins (*1949), published between 1995 and 2007. The story starts in our near future, just after the Rapture in which all 'real Christians' have been taken to heaven by God. The remnants face seven years of 'tribulation', a second and last change to embrace Christ in the face of the Antichrist's machinations.[40]

In the game series, the Tribulation Forces are set against the Global Community Peacekeepers, a proxy United Nations controlled by an incognito anti-Christ.[41] The Tribulation Forces recruit 'rock singers, recruiters, missionaries, healers, and spirit warriors', while the other side does the same with 'heavy metal rock stars, college-educated "secularists", cult leaders, gang bosses, and the Antichrist's elite hell-spawned demons.'[42] The ultimate goal of the real-time strategy games is the conversion of as many people as possible, in order to confront the Peacekeepers head-on in an all-round military conflict.

The game series have been criticized for the promotion of intolerance against non- or other believers, the distribution by megachurches, and – again – a ludo-narrative dissonance.[43] Peacefully proselytizing 'neutral forces' to Christianity and praying to raise the spiritual level of the game world, while violently attacking the religious opposition is a complex theological paradox to swallow. Furthermore, the possibility - in multiplayer mode – to take the side of the Peacekeepers and to fight (and win) against the Tribulation Force.[44]

The problem of combining the Christian hesitance against (digital) violence, on the one hand, and the apparent need for it in the video game market, on the other, is a threat traceable to many of the Christian games, and is certainly not contained to Eternal Forces. For example, in the first-person shooter Catechumen (N'Lightning Software Development, 2000) – clearly inspired by the success of Quake and the like – tries to mediate this problem by arming the gamer with angelic weapons that kill non-human foes such as demons and so on, but cause human antagonists to fall on their knees and start praying to God.

The game is heavily based on the Roman persecution of Christians in the first centuries. The player starts

in the catacombs of the Colosseum in Rome and works gradually his way into the pits of hell. The game implicitly suggests that the Roman Empire was satanic in origin in the first place, hence referring to a popular but a now academically debated idea that Christians were persecuted because of their religious identity.[45] The Colosseum, of course, is the hallmark location of Christian persecution.

After shooters, real-time strategy, and platform games, the 2000s also gave birth to the first of a series of three Christian adventure games that would overflow to the next decade: Adam's Venture. Episode 1. The Search for the Lost Garden (2009), Episode 2. Solomon's Secret (2011), and Episode 3. Revelations (2012). The series' protagonist, in a spark of unimaginable originality called Adam Venture, is searching for religious objects from the Old and New Testament in an Indiana Jones and Lara Croft kind of fashion. Critics pointed out the simplicity of the puzzles and – again – the superficial super positioning a Christian narrative over a modest and very common kind of game.

THE FOURTH DECADE: 2010s

The fourth decade did not change things fundamentally. We did see a sharp rise in mobile games following general technological developments, such as All Aboard the Ark (2015), Noah's Bunny Problem (2015), Sheep Master (2016), Noah's Elephant in the Room (2017), and Alpha/Omega. The Christian RPG (2018). Like the previous decade, a lot of VeggieTales spin-offs games were produced by Big Idea: from Jonah. A VeggieTales Game (2002) and The Mystery of Veggie Island (2002) until Step-by-Story presents: The Goofy Gift (2011), Step-by-Story presents: Larry's Missing Music (2012), and VeggieTales Spotisodes Collection (2012).

The VeggieTales (2002-present) is an American, Christian, computer-

generated animation series (books, films, and games), created by Phil Vischer and Mike Nawrocki, about a kind group of anthropomorphised vegetables, whose adventures closely resembles stories found in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The series have been nominated for various international prizes, including three Emmy Awards and four Annie Awards, but have also been criticized for racism.[46] After having filed for bankruptcy and having lost ownership of the VeggieTales in 2003, Vischer criticized his own creation for teaching "a mix of the Protestant work ethic, the American dream, and the gospel", to a point "we can't tell them apart anymore".[47]

A bit more light-hearted is the Jesus Christ RPG trilogy, consisting of Jesus Christ RPG, Baby Jesus Christ RPG and Rose Jesus Christ RPG, created in 2014 for RPG Maker, a freely distributed game development platform (but later distributed as a stand-alone via Steam) by a small studio called Wholetone Games. Later, the company also produced Lucifer. Paradise Lost, a prequel to the original trilogy, loosely based on Milton's famous poem with the same title. Lucifer, however, is a top-down shooter, while the original trilogy featured turn-based combat as its main ludic element. It is hard to make sense of these games: they follow the New Testament narrative rather closely (the trilogy that is), but the added gameplay elements feel forced again.

Another game that lives on the fringes of the Christian game genre is Run Jesus Run a.k.a. The 10 Second Gospel (2010), a free browser game by Molleindustria. In this heavily pixelated game, the player has ten seconds to guide Jesus from his manger to the cross by 'doing Jesus things': for example, defying the devil (Luke 4:1-13), feed the five thousand (John 6:1-4), or walk on water (Mark 6:45-52). The game shows the biblical finding places explicitly.

The game has an interesting theological twist. If the player fails on anything during the ten seconds the game lasts, an empty cross appears: Jesus did not make it to the cross. But when the player succeeds, Jesus is shown hanging on it. It appears to be an allusion to Matthew 16:25: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (New International Version). It is even more intriguing if one looks at Molleindustria's game catalogue, which includes games with colourful titles such as Faith Fighter, in which religious leaders such as Moses, Jesus, and Buddha have to fight against one another Street Fighter style, Operation Pedopriest, where the player has to cover-up sex scandals, and Orgasm Simulator, apparently aimed at improving one capacity to fake an organism during sexual intercourse.

In 2020, another hallmark of the Christian games surfaced: LOGOS. Bible Video Games, produced and

developed by TeComprendo, a Mexican studio claiming wanting to do everything right that previous Bible games did wrong. On their blog, the developers state:

> We think that a good Bible game must be a game in the first place. (...) We didn't try to make a method to learn, instead, we tried to see the Bible as a story to be lived. (...) There's a lack of game interactivity in other Bible-based games that, maybe, is due to the ferreous emphasis of the Bible learning objective. Again, it is not bad to try to learn things about the Bible, but a videogame must be a game in the first place.[48]

Notwithstanding these justified observations and good intentions, LOGOS falls flat on its face in terms of quality. Even though it was published in 2020, the graphics are reminiscent of the Play Station 2 era (starting in 2000). The third person 'shooter' – for the lack of a better word – takes the player through famous biblical stories such as the creation of the world or the exile from Egypt. But again, the ludic elements – fighting against animals and adversaries – feel detached from the narrative.

2.3 Religion and game studies

Notwithstanding this "bad marriage" between institutionalized religion and video games, these games are regularly laced with (references to) existing historical religions, and fictional/fictionalized religions.[49] Examples are – among many others – Bioshock (2007), Bioshock Infinite (2013), the Wolfenstein series (1981-2019), the Assassin's Creed series (2007-2023), the Dishonored series (2012-2017), Child of Light (2014), the Mass Effect series (2007-2021), and the aforementioned Metro series (2010-2019).[50]

As I argued earlier, in 2019, one can find and categorize the occurrence

"Notwithstanding this "bad marriage" between institutionalized religion and video games, these games are regularly laced with (references to) existing historical religions, and fictional/fictionalized religions."

of religion in video games in five distinct but not mutually exclusive categories.[51]

Material religion is the "explicit occurrence of (existing or fantasy) religion within the game itself": The chapel buried in the desert of Mad Max (2015), Father Clements' Chapel of Alle Faiths in Fallout 4 (2015), or the Holy Mass celebration in the Sistine Chapel in Assassin's Creed 2 (2009). It is the "simplest" form of religion in video games, visible and recognizable for the majority of individual players.

Referential religion is the "implicit or explicit reference in the game to an existing religious tradition outside the game": The use of the Christian imagery and conceptions of Eden prime, the Krogan Eva, and the robot Gesamtgestalt called "Legion" from the Mass Effect series, or the invocation of John 1 in Skullface's monologue in Metal Gear 5. The Phantom Pain (2015).

Reflexive religion occurs when the game addresses "existential notions that are traditionally associated with religion": Free will versus predestination in Kingdoms of Amalur. The Reckoning (2012), the quality of disobedience as a conditio sine qua non for the human self-identity in The Talos Principle (2014) and The Turing Test (2016), or the (im)possibility of redemption in Bioshock Infinite (2013).[52]

> "Even though the study of religion within video games seems like an obvious matter, the intersection of game studies and religious studies remains relatively underexplored."

Ritual religion, on the other hand, occurs when the game stimulates and/or forces the player to behave (in-game) in such a way traditionally associated with religion. As an illustration, consider the 'Capsuleer Cemetery' within Eve Online (2003), a virtual space where deceased players' avatars and real-life individuals are commemorated. This poignant memorial takes the form of a vast star-ship cemetery encircling the in-game moon of Molea II.[53] Another well-known instance involves James Payne, who, following his tragic battle with cancer, was

immortalized as a Roman commander within his favourite game, Total War: Rome II (2004).[54] More recently, in the game Fortnite (2017), players collectively established an unofficial ceasefire, often referred to as a "sacred truce," to facilitate their participation in a unique in-game event.[55] Or the Final Fantasy XIV (2013) on-line funeral for a player who died of COVID-19.[56]

Meta religion occurs when "the experience of gaming itself is identified as religious." I want to elaborate theologically on this form further in this article, connecting it to the example from Metro Last Light with which I started the article.

But first, even though the study of religion within video games seems like an obvious matter, the intersection of game studies and religious studies remains relatively underexplored.[57] It appears that video game scholars generally show limited interest in matters related to religion, while scholars of religion often lack a deep affinity for, knowledge of, and experience with video games. Nevertheless, several significant studies have been published, including both monographs and edited volumes, in chronological order: Halos & Avatars: Playing Video Games with God by Detweiler (2010), Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality by Wagner (2012), eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming by Bainbridge (2013), Playing with Religion in Digital Games by Campbell and Grieve (2014), and Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion by Sisler, Radde-Antweiler, and Zeiler (2018).[58] Notably, the Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, hosted by the University of Heidelberg (Germany), published three dedicated issues on this subject in 2014, 2015, and 2016. However, all these publications primarily fall within the realm of religious studies, rather than theology.[59]

Belgian theologian Lieven Boeve highlights the distinction between religious studies and theology as that of an outsider versus an insider perspective. Those in religious studies approach the study of religion from an external, observational standpoint and are not necessarily adherents of the religion they study. In contrast, theologians, as active participants, seek a deeper understanding of the religious tradition they belong to, aiming to comprehend the meaning of life and communal existence from within.[60] The field of religion and video game studies has predominantly been shaped by a perspective rooted in religious studies rather than theology. The limited involvement of theologians in the examination of video games is indeed notable, as observed by Benjamin Chicka. Thus far, this gap has remained largely unaddressed, with only a few individual articles and works such as Kevin Schut's Of Games and God (2013), Chicka's Playing as the Other: Theology

and Ethical Responsibility in Video Games (2021), and my own Gaming and the Divine: A New Systematic Theology of Video Games (2019) standing as exceptions to this pattern.[61]

3. A CULTURAL-THEOLOGICAL APPROACH: VIDEO GAMES AS "LOCI THEOLOGICI"

If I recapitulate what we have discussed above, a considerable amount of video games feature religion, even if the institutionalized religion is somewhat at odds with the concept of video games in and of itself, while the religion and video game scholarship seriously lacks a theological vis-à-vis religion studies perspective. But before I can argue in favour of a (cultural) theological perspective on video games, I have to address one more, very important and very peculiar characteristic of our Western, secularized society: the apparent paradoxical persistence of Christian aesthetics and rhetoric in our cultural domain.

Secularism is an important aspect of, and collective self-identifier for the modern, Western world.[62] What started as a practical solution by European Enlightenment thinkers such as Robespierre and John Locke, against the ongoing and apparently unstoppable sequence of European wars of religion during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries – the exclusion of the theological question about the truthfulness of any given religion and/or denomination from the political-societal domain – evolved into a general understanding of the radical immanent nature of reality per se, first formulated and adopted by the 19th-century intellectuals, spearheaded by Nietzsche's conclusion that humanity has "killed God", and later democratised and materialized in the second half of the 21st century by way of the slowly increasing individualisation and deinstitutionalization of the West European and, to a lesser degree, the North American populi.

"If I recapitulate what we have discussed above, a considerable amount of video games feature religion, even if the institutionalized religion is somewhat at odds with the concept of video games in and of itself, while the religion and video game scholarship seriously lacks a theological vis-à-vis religion studies perspective."

“The idea of modern video games (and novels, films, and series) as loci theologici finds its context in the branch of systematic theology, known as cultural theology.”

This process of secularisation seems to be at odds with the various references to the (Christian) religious traditions in our modern culture. In animated sitcoms such as South Park (1997-present) and Rick and Morty (2013-present), in blockbuster films such as Avatar (2009) and Barbie (2023), in Netflix series such as Squid Games (2021) and The Good Place (2016-2020), and in video games mentioned earlier in this article, we find multiple references to (primarily) the Christian narrative.[63] This persistence has, at least, three possible, not mutually-exclusive reasons, namely our secular society is in and of itself Christian in nature; these cultural references are echoes of a collective past without their former religious and theological significances, and they are loci theologici.[64] For the remainder of the article, I will focus on this third (theological) option.

The idea of modern video games (and novels, films, and series) as loci theologici finds its context in the branch of systematic theology, known as cultural theology. Cultural theology, or theology of culture, is the provisional culmination of a two millennia-long theological process. What initially started as a positive evaluation by Christian theologians of the non-Christian Umwelt evolved gradually in an appreciation of our secular culture as a genuine finding place (locus theologicus) for God’s continuous self-revelation as Creator, Saviour, and Whole-Maker.[65] In the past decades, a very fine number of cultural theologies have been written, both as monographs and as edited volumes.[66]

Within the history of Christianity, numerous notions and concepts have been suggested to think about the relationship between the Christian religion and the non-Christian culture, starting with Justin the Martyr (100/114-c. 165) and his logoi spermatikoi, or rationes seminalis in Latin (both meaning “seeds of knowledge”).[67] Drawing from a Platonic perspective regarding the divine logos mentioned in the Gospel of

John, specifically, "and the logos became flesh", Justin contended in his Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo and First Apology that Christianity represented the realization of Roman-Greek philosophy, thus validating con-Christian philosophy as a kind of prelude to Christ.[68]

The notion of the spolia Aegyptiorum ("the spoils [of war] of Egypt") is an adjacent one, positioning pagan (Greek) philosophy as something "to be plundered", since everything true has always belonged to Christianity.[69] Theologians such as Clemens of Alexandria (Stromateis), Irenaeus (Against the Heresies), Tertullian (Against Marcion), Origen (Epistula ad Gregorium), Gregory of Nazianzus (Oratio in S. Pascha), Gregory of Nyssa (De vita Moysis), Ambrose of Milan (De Abraham), and Augustine (Confessiones, De Doctrina Christiana, and De Civitate Dei) were defenders of this position.

The praeparatio Evangelico or preparation Evangelii is another adjacent concept, positioning Greek philosophy and Hellenistic religions (plural!) as "preparation for the Gospel". As Jenkins summarizes,

> [w]hen early Christians saw the many parallels between their own new religion and the ancient practices of Mediterranean paganism, they argued that God had already sowed the older cultures with ideas and themes that would grow to fruition once they were interpreted in a fully Christian context. The traditional religions should be seen as a praeparatio Evangelica, a preparation for the gospel.[70]

Ignatius of Loyola and the Society of Jesus are known for the notion of "finding God in all things". This principle of finding and serving God in all things is rooted in a teleological-creational world view, which asserts that all that exists is inherently directed toward its Creator. It is also deeply intertwined with the evangelical mission of recognizing Christ in every individual, especially those in need (Matthew 25:31-46), the perpetual quest for God's calling, continuous introspection regarding our own mixed motivations in life, and a zealous commitment to serving God with a selfless love.[71]

Another concept is that of 'implicit theology' of our contemporary society, a notion dominant in the works of both Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann summarizes what theology should do, according to him:

> If we want to perceive the unmistakably theological, and hence universal, task of the kingdom of God in the modern world today and tomorrow, we have to grasp the implicit theology of this modern world of ours, and understand why and how it was born, so that we can recognize both its vitality and its congenital defects. The modern world is a child of the Jewish and the Christian hope.[72]

Tillich's theology is comparable to that of Moltmann.[73] Tillich differentiates between the "theology of the church", the interpretation of materials found in the explicit religious sphere of the (Christian) church such as sacred scriptures, dogmatics, liturgy, church history in the strict sense, church law, and so forth, while "theology of culture" concerns the "religious substance" in the other spheres of human life such as science, art, morality, politics, economics, and so forth.

The Second Vatican Council, in its Gaudium et Spes (1965), paragraph 4, contemplated the notion of "the signs of our times", which are to be "scrutinized" and to "be interpreted in the light of the Gospel".

> To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.

"Within this two millennia-old context of theological thinking about the non-Christian Umwelt, my proposal fits to view our contemporary cultural, in general, and of video games, specifically, as a genuine locus theologicus."

Interestingly enough, the notion of "signs of the times" is taken from Matthew 16 and 24. In that context, the "signs of the times" are connected to the nearing of Christ's second coming including some heavy apocalyptic and eschatological imagery and rhetoric. Even more interesting is the Council's omission of what these "signs" might be. The International Theological Commission, however, gave some clarifications: the "signs of the times" are indeed to be found in human history itself:

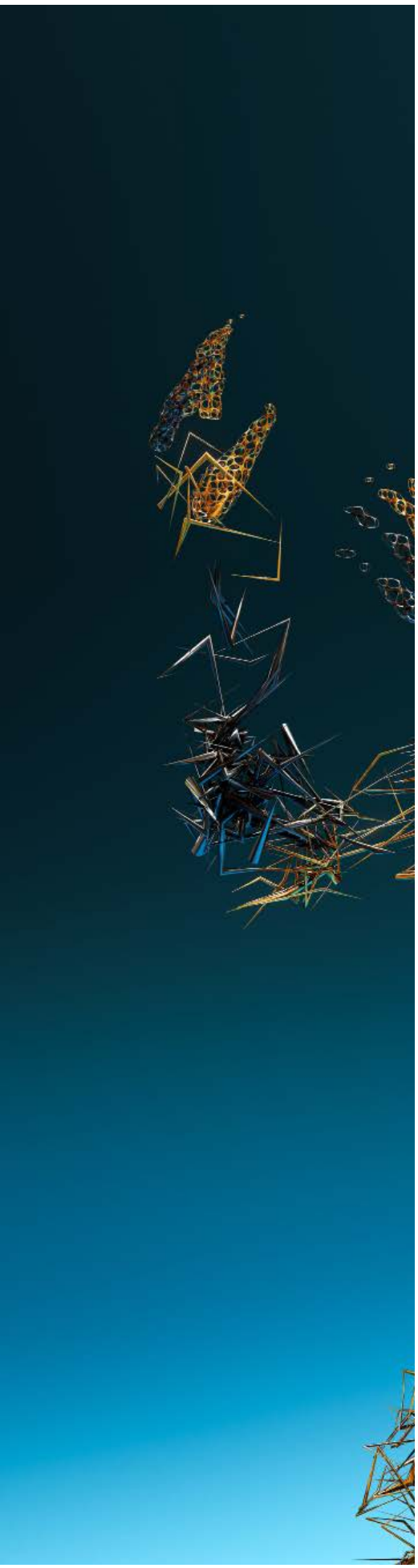
> The 'signs of the times' may be described as those events or

> phenomena in human history which, in a sense, because of their impact or extent, define the face of a period, and bring to expression particular needs and aspirations of humanity at that time. (...) A criterion of Catholic theology is that it should be in constant dialogue with the world. It should help the Church to read the signs of the times illuminated by the light that comes from divine revelation, and to profit from doing so in its life and mission.[74]

Within this two millennia-old context of theological thinking about the non-Christian Umwelt, my proposal fits to view our contemporary cultural, in general, and of video games, specifically, as a genuine locus theologicus. The notion of loci theologici stems from the Dominican Melchor Cano (1509-1560). In his De Locis Theologicis (1562), he contemplates on the sources of theological knowledge.[75] Cano's list comprises, among others, Scripture, oral tradition, the ecumenical councils, the Church Fathers, the Scholastic theologians, philosophers, human reason, and history. Contemporary culture and video games can be regarded to be among such finding places, if and when they reveal something of God. The challenge of the individual cultural theologian is therefore – every case study again – to argue in favour of (or against) a cultural object revealing God. The aforementioned notions such as the logoi spermatikoi, the spolia Aegyptiorum, and so forth form a theological framework in which an object can be God-revealing, but not necessarily so.

The question is then, if video games can be regarded as a locus theologicus, what does it reveal? The short answer is: God reveals himself. And how does God reveal himself? Again, the short answer is: as Creator, Saviour, and Whole-Maker, or Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as they are commonly known in Christian tradition. Revelator

> "This kind of cultural theology does share a number of characteristics with "natural theology".



and revelation are one and the same.[76] As Shirley Guthrie summarizes:

> God reveals God's self. Revelation is not the giving of some supernatural information about God and human life in the world. It means that God confronts us person-to-person. To receive God's self-revelation is to know not something but someone we did not know before.[77]

This kind of cultural theology does share a number of characteristics with "natural theology". Natural theology – or theology of nature – is "the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divining relegation or scripture".[78] Initially started during the Enlightenment as an explicit Christian understanding of the "book of Nature", that is, the possibility of knowing God exclusively through human reason, eventually evolved into a Christian-apologetic instrument to prove the reasonability of the Christian faith against other- or non-believers. Of course, natural theology has had its fierce critics, among whom Karl Barth is possibly one of the most famous, especially in his discussion with Emil Brummer in 1934.[79] However, some contemporary theologians such as Alister McGrath still promote natural theology, if not in combination with, and on the basis of the (revealed) presupposition of a divine Creator, who reveals himself through this "book of Nature".[80]

4. CASE STUDY: "METRO LAST LIGHT"

Finally, we can go back to our case study, Metro Last Light. The Metro series consists of three instalments, all sharing one overarching fictional game world: Metro 2033 (2010), Metro Last Light (2013), and Metro Exodus (2019). All games are based on the novels of the Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky, developed by (now Malta-based)

Ukrainian studio 4A Games (in light of current geo-political developments, a rather ironic combination), and published by THQ and later Deep Silver.

The premise of the series is that, in 2013 – three years in the future, calculated from the release of the first game – a major nuclear conflict would erupt, known as the Third World War. Starting as a local conflict within the Middle East, Russia and the United States were quickly involved, enacting their "mutual assured destruction" by launching their nuclear arsenal against one another.[81] In Moscow, the locus dramaticus of the first two and part of the third instalment, 50,000 citizens have managed to escape nuclear Armageddon by fleeing into the Underground. As far as they are concerned, they are the last survivors of the human race on earth; only in Metro Exodus, we learn that this is not the case.

Even though the Moscow survivors did survive the human-made Apocalypse, they did not lose some irrefutable human character traits, der Wille zur Macht ("the will to power"), as the German philosopher Nietzsche concisely formulated in his 1883 Also sprach Zarathustra (translated in English as Thus Spoke Zarathustra).[82] The Underground survivor scavage for spare components to primitive technology and cultivate mushrooms as a source of food. Meanwhile, the small part of the animal kingdom, having survived the nuclear blast and its aftermath, have mutated into hideous and very dangerous animals. Together with the necessity to use breathing masks when traveling on the surface, only a few very brave dare to wander the wastelands. Within the Underground, a raging conflict erupts between the continuation of the Communist Party and the Neo-Nazis: they capture each other's supports, terrorize non-combatants, and loot each other's scars supplies. In between the two large fractions, we have the Rangers, a neutral entity trying to keep an unstable peace. Artyom, the game series' protagonist, is a member of the Rangers.

At the beginning of the third instalment, Metro Exodus, the player is presented by an introduction cutscene with Artyom as the narrator. He relates how the world of Metro came into being. I will quote it in full because it is very instructive:

> I still remember life before the War. I remember that we used to be different, used to live up there, on the surface. We used to be the masters of the whole world. We built gigantic cities of glass and steel, we crossed oceans at will, and we also conquered the skies. There used to be seven billion of us. We were not born for life in the tunnels. I was born to breathe fresh air and I remember it! The seven billion were wiped out by the Last War. Only fifty thousand managed to survive underground, with the

> Surface poisoned, burnt and teeming with horrible monsters. One day the radiation on the surface might subside, and our grandchildren or their grandchildren might be able to return there. At least, that's what my brothers-in-arms from the Order believe. Basically, there was no hope for us right off the start. Still, we, humans, are just too bad at surrendering. We tried to make the best of what we had, we banded together and worked to make the Metro our new home.
>
> After all, it might well be the only place left on Earth for humans to live. For a time, we thought we could make it... But, regrettably, the War didn't kill our bad habits. In the relative safety of the tunnels, corruption festered, and when danger came from above the ground, only a few of us stood against it, our numbers dwindling by the day. But I remember we were born for a better life, and I can't accept that I'm destined to grow old and die underground. I don't care if I'm called an idiot, but if even a single shard of the old world still exists out there, I have to find it. Between endless years of hopeless existence and even a single moment of hope, I must choose hope. I must find that signal!

The "signal" mentioning is the impulse that drives Metro Exodus' narrative: it is an indication that, outside the Moscow Underground, other pockets of human survival exist. The neutral and matter-of-fact tone of this introduction does not have much to go on theologically: it appears to be void of any religious aspect whatsoever.

4.1 The "Genesis trailer"

This is quite different from the "Genesis Trailer", released by 4A Games, as a teaser for their second game, Metro Last Light. Again, we

hear Artyom as voice-over-cum-narrator, narrating the becoming of the world of Metro, but this time in an overtly religious vocabulary. Again, I will quote it in full

> In the beginning God said: Let there be light to burn away the darkness. On the second day, the sky was born as a majestic canopy for the earth. On the following day, God sculpted the bountiful earth and planted it with trees. With the fourth day, God split day from night and blessed the earth with the cycle of the seasons. Then, God filled the sea with life and set forth the birds to soar in the skies. On the sixth day, God created gloryful creatures. Chief of these were mankind, whom he created in his own image [emphasis FGB]. He blessed them, giving them dominion over all living things. To care for. To nurture. To rule.

During this trailer, the visual and the audial are contrasted to one another. The voice-over relates – truthfully if paraphrasingly – the first six days of creation, as laid down in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. The "chorus" of Genesis 1 is "God saw that it was good", an indication of the beauty, truthfulness, and perfection of God's original work.[83] Visually, this message of the world's original goodness is contrasted with images showing the aftermath of the Third World War: the ruins of Moscow, demolished infrastructure, dried-up rivers, out-of-control weather, mutated and violent animals, and overcrowded metro tunnels. Humanity is placed against God, demolisher versus creator. Whatever was good once is now utterly destroyed: a powerful indictment against humanity and its irresponsible stewardship.[84]

On the sixth day, God created humankind. "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27; NASB20). And God blessed them, giving humanity its first briefing:

> Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth. (...) Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every animal of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to everything that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food. (Genesis 1:28-30; NASB20)

The "Genesis trailer" uses a number of expressions to formulate what position God gave to humanity within the grand scheme of his creation, "giving dominion", "caring", "nurturing", and "ruling", resembling those of

Genesis 1, "filling", "subduing", and "ruling". In the trailer, these words but the last one – "rule" – are accompanied by Metro dwellers enjoying each other's company, cooking simple food over open fire, working with wood, adults taking care of children, comforting them, and even entertaining them by the primitive means available. The word "rule", however, is connected to ominous sounds of approaching danger, people who swear loyalty to their Führer, and aggressive mutants attacking well-armed guards. Again, humanity's original calling is contrasted with its eventual outcome: humanity's "ruling" of, and over the world and everything that is living on it, did manifest in the last millennia. This manifestation of humanity's ruling is, however, not the soft, caring, and nurturing kind of governance, but of the oppressive, dominant, and violent kind.

The trailer troubles itself to point out that God created humanity "in his own image", a quotation from Genesis 1:27, and the cornerstone of Christian anthropology for almost two millennia. There is a lot of theological discussion on the exact meaning of the phrase, but some traits are almost universally acknowledged: God and humanity have something in common; this likeness concerns all human beings; human sinfulness has "damaged" that likeness to a certain degree, and within the New Testament context, it is a Christological concept.[85] With that last part, theologians mean that Jesus Christ is the true eikon ("image" in Greek) of God, who makes the invisible God visible in creation. (I will return to this Christological component later on in this article.) Views diversify on the determination of the exact nature of the human-God alikeness: substantial (rationality, morality, consciousness, and such), relational (the capacity to engage in relationships), functional (the ability to steward the earth), corporate (as a collective of all human beings or even all living things), and trinitarian (the relation God-humanity mirrors that within the trinity), to name a few, are proposed and criticized.[86]

The trailer continues with an "intermission" during which no voice-over is heard speaking and a raging battle is shown, in one of the metro's tunnels, between armed guards and mutant monsters. The battle ends in a scene filled with dead, dismembered guards, blood dripping and flowing all over the place, and rats scavenging among this debris. During this horrid scene, the voice-over is heard again, continuing his paraphrasing of Genesis 1, now coming to the seventh day:

> On the seventh day, they say, God rested. But God didn't rest. God left. Or perhaps died. Judgement Day came and he abandoned us, casting humanity aside like parasites. But there is still hope. We have to face this hell full on. My fate, I hold in my own hands.

For the seventh day, the voice-over no longer follows the biblical account, but deviates into a criticism of his own. The voice-over negates that God "rested" as "they say" (in Genesis 2:2-3) but suggests two other options: God left or God died. To start with this second one, the expression "God is dead" is indissolubly connected to the work and thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his 1882 Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (translated in English as "The Gay Science"), the philosopher lets "The Madman" declare:

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (translation by Walter Kaufmann)[87]

Contrary to its use in 21st-century discourses as a victory cry of secularists and atheists over the allegedly superstitious and primitive pre-modern era, Nietzsche's story is more observational than normative in nature. The German philosopher witnessed and commented on a serious diminishing influence of traditional religious beliefs and moral values in and on Western society as the traditional role of religion as the foundation of morality and meaning was eroding. This had moral consequences – the philosopher was weary of a threatening moral vacuum or nihilism, where people could lose a sense of purpose and direction. He saw the "death of God" as an opportunity for individuals to take more responsibility for creating their own values and defining their own morality, with all the risks involved with such a project.[88]

The second option, the trailer's voice-over provides, is God's disappearance, instead of his death. A God that disappears, or has disappeared from the scene, is a God that is not interacting with the world. It is the opposite of a caring or nurturing God. In the context of the nuclear catastrophe that is the Third World War, the disappearance of God signifies the fundamental theological issue of the "theodicy". The theodicy literally means "defence of God" (from the Greek theos, "God", and dike, "justice") and is tied to the human experience of the existence of evil and suffering vis-à-vis the monotheistic belief in a necessary all-powerful and all-loving God. The term "theodicy" itself was coined by Godfried Leibniz in his 1710 Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal. As Hume summarized in part 10 of his 1779 Dialogues concerning Natural Religion:

> [I]s [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent? Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent? Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?

Throughout Christian history, two distinct theological defences, as noted by John Hick, have emerged in response to the problem of evil.[89] One group, following the tradition of the Greek bishop Irenaeus of Lyon (circa 140-202), seeks to justify the existence of evil by positing that there is a greater good beyond it. This perspective suggests that God permits evil as a means to an end. Evil serves as a test of faith, a form of divine retribution for human sins, an opportunity for spiritual growth, or a hidden blessing due to human limitations in comprehending the grand design of creation. Conversely, the second group, influenced by the teachings of the African bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430), attributes the origin of suffering and evil to human free will. In this perspective, God allows evil not because it serves a purpose but because it is the natural consequence of human choices. Human beings

are responsible for their suffering, and God is absolved of blame.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly after World War II, new categories of theodicies have emerged. Mark Scott's book Pathways in Theodicy outlines three prominent ones.[90] Process Theodicies reject Aristotelian metaphysics and argue in favour of God's infinite conceptual realization of the vast potentiality. God is seen as a source of boundless cosmic possibilities, underlying all of creation. Cruciform Theodicies focus on God's co-suffering with humanity through the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross. This perspective originated in response to the Holocaust, with theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz, and Dorothee Sölle pondering God's presence in the face of such immense suffering.[91] Anti-Theodicies reject any attempt to defend God. Atheistic anti-theodicies do so as part of their broader rejection of transcendent realities and as an argument against the existence of a divine being. Theistic anti-theodicies argue that theoretical defences cannot adequately address the historical and practical suffering of individuals while not rejecting the concept of God itself.[92]

It is not uncommon for video games to dwell on the theodicy question. In Assassin's Creed Rogue (2014), a young and resourceful captain by the name of Shay Cormac arrives in the port of Lisbon on 1 November 1755.[93] His mission is to retrieve an ancient and mythical artifact, sought after by those who desire its extraordinary power. As he traverses the city, the church bells chime, calling the faithful to celebrate the catholic Feast of All Saints. Shay enters a cathedral, where a priest conducts the Holy Mass in Latin. Unperturbed by the worshippers and the harmonious Gregorian chants, Shay's climbing and parcour skills lead him to a concealed entrance in the church, unveiling a cavern beneath.

Within this cave lies a colossal pyramid-shaped object, accessible via a narrow stone ledge. Suspended above a stone pillar in front of the pyramid, a peculiar shape-shifting cube, the coveted artifact, catches Shay's eye. In a hushed tone, he recognizes it as "the artifact" and reaches out to claim it. However, as the artifact finds its way into Shay's grasp, it crumbles into dust, triggering a catastrophic earthquake that engulfs the cave, the church above it, and the surrounding city. Shay must make a desperate escape through the turmoil of fires, debris, and chaos of the devastated city. Ultimately, Shay manages to reach his ship, which miraculously remains undamaged and sets sail. A fellow sailor rescues him, and as they gaze upon the ruined city, the sailor questions how God could allow such devastation. In response, Shay, a complex mix of shame and anger, declares that God had no involvement in these events.

The mission bears the name "Kyrie Eleison", a reference to the well-known Roman Catholic prayer, a mandatory element of Eucharistic celebrations to this day. This prayer, expressed in Greek, the language of the New Testament, translates to "Lord, have mercy". The significance of this prayer intertwines with the setting and date of the scene. On 1 November 1755, Lisbon endured a devastating earthquake that claimed numerous lives and laid waste to more than half of the city, including cherished palaces, libraries, and artistic treasures.[94] The discourse on theodicy in our Western context has long been intertwined with this specific catastrophic event in Portugal.[95] Voltaire, in his "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," vehemently criticized Leibniz's notion that humankind resides in the best possible world, as presented in Leibniz's work Essais de théodicée from 1710. Subsequently, Leibniz and his metaphysical optimism became the subject of ridicule by Voltaire, portrayed as Dr Pangloss, the pedagogue of "metaphysicotheologo-cosmolonigology" in his work Candide (1759).

Another example is Wolfenstein. The New Order (2014), featuring an all historical narrative set in an alternative 1960s in which the Nazis won the Second World War and occupied both Europe and the United States of America.[96] One of the game's levels is set in a fictional Nazi concentration camp, called Belica, probably portrayed after the Jasenovac concentration camp in erstwhile Croatia.[97] The player's avatar-cum-game's protagonist, the American soldier William "B.J." Blakowicz lets himself be incarcerated at this camp at the behest of the German resistance group, named after their historical counterpart, the Kreisau Circle (or "Kreisauer Kreis" in German).[98] In Belica, a specific Jewish prisoner is located, Set Roth, the apparently last living member of a secret and mystic organisation, called the Da'at Yichud.[99] Blazkowicz has to get Roth out, for his Da'at Yichud technology could turn to tides of war in favour of the Allies. Eventually, B.J. succeeds in both.

In the camp, B.J. and Roth are both witnessing the molestation and execution of a Jewish woman by the camp's commandant, Frau Engel, and a super-sized robot, built by the Nazis based on stolen Da'at Yichud technology. Seth questions his belief in God in the face of this evil and suffering. B.J. tries to reason with him, using a Irenaean theodicy.

> Roth: This woman, I knew her well. Resilient. A will of iron. Her family all gone. All of them, yet... Faith. Faith kept her going. I... I... I cannot believe with such certainty. For me, in everything there must be doubt. Otherwise, there is no room to question. To learn. This place. This is the fruit of unquestioned, ferocious conviction. This is where absolute certainly leads.

B.J.: Yet you are a believer.

Roth: I often wonder what kind of god would sanction suffering such as this. And I question myself whether my faith is misplaced.

B.J.: Maybe he is testing us?

Roth: Well, (...) if he is testing us, we are failing gloriously.

This is one of the many examples of any theodicy that, when faced with concrete suffering of individual human beings, all theoretical reasoning ceases to have any lasting relevance.[100] What is there to test in the case of Belica's young, Jewish woman? Certainly not her own faith: it is applauded by Roth and she apparently kept to it until the very end. Maybe to test the faith of Roth or B.J. or maybe even that of the whole world? Even if so, in what way or capacity does this "testing" justify the fate of the Jewish woman?

The theodicy of the Metro series seems to be an atheist Anti-Theodicy. If God did exist, this nuclear worldwide disaster would not have happened. But since it has happened, it can only mean that there is no God. So the world of the Metro series is an explicit atheistic one: no God exists. The only hope, as the trailer's narrator conveys, lies in humanity's own hands, a truly Nietzschean expression: "We have to face this hell full on. My fate, I hold in my own hands."

4.2 The Metro's true icon

Let us turn our attention from the "Genesis" trailer and its overtly theological considerations to the game with which I started the article, Metro Last Light. As stated briefly above, Metro Last Light takes place 21 years after the nuclear disaster ended the Third World War by decimating the human population on earth and forcing 50,000

Muscovites to take shelter in the capital's metro system. Artyom, the player's avatar, is a Ranger in the Sparta Order: battle-hardened soldiers, evolved out of the pre-War Russian Army or the Russian Special Forces. They guard the peace in the metro and dare to roam deeply into the wastelands above. The Rangers are feared by thieves, bandits, the Red Line (the Communists), and the Reich (Nazis) alike.

In the beginning of Metro Last Light, Artyom finds himself, captured, in the company of Pavel Morozov, major in the Red Line army. Together they escape, protect and save each other's lives multiple times, bonding over their common strive for unity and order in the metro. When they finally arrive in "the Polis", the political and financial centre of the metro, located below Moscow State Library and General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation building, Pavel spikes Artyom's drinks. Then, Artyom is handed over to General Czeslav Andreyevich Korbut, the head of intelligence for the Red Line. Even though Artyom manages to escape his Red Line imprisonment, he is very deeply hurt by Pavel's betrayal, especially because of their camaraderie and bonding over their mutual adventures in the metro and on the surface.

Eventually, Artyom hunts Pavel down in the ruins of the Mother of God Cathedral in Moscow. The building still stands, but virtually all references to its former religious identity have been destroyed. The only thing the player sees are knocked-over candle holders and some kneel benches. In a side corridor of the cathedral, Artyom finds Pavel, sitting against a small, wooden cupboard. He is wearing a gas mask, like one must if one wants to survive in the toxic wastelands that once was Moscow, but without a filter. When having approached Pavel, a cutscene starts, showing Artyom placing his knife at Pavel's throat and Pavel challenging Artyom to "have no remorse", a little "Dark One" jumps in, placing his hands on the heads of both Artyom and Pavel. This "Dark One" is, seemingly, the last living member of an unknown sapiens species developed from humanity after the nuclear war. Their hideout was canonically destroyed at the end of Metro 2033. In Metro Last Light, the Little One is observing humanity and its morality through the actions of Artyom, whom he shadows through the majority of the game.

When the little Dark One places his hands on Artyom's and Pavel's head, a kind of parapsychological connection between the two men occurs. Artyom (and thus the player) witnesses, from the perspective of Pavel, the true machinations of the Red Line, who aim to occupy an old biological laboratory, located somewhere in the Metro, to use its biological weapons to seize control over the underground and all who live there. At the end of this "vision", we see Pavel grasped by the "Damned Souls", whose hands pull him slowly but unavoidably into a dark abyss. Artyom (and thus the player) is placed for a choice: to do nothing and let Pavel be absorbed by

the Damned Souls – implying he will die – or to pull him from the abyss – implying he will live.

In any other medium, the choice would only lie on the level of the text-internal author who decides what one character would do to another, both being equally under this author's directional control. However, in an interactive medium such as a game like Metro Last Light, the choice is given to the internal player, entangled as it is with its in-game avatar. Asking Artyom to choose, is asking the player to do so, and vice versa. And since this is open choice, both options can be taken. If Artyom-cum-the player chooses to do nothing, Pavel dies and the Little One comments: "You couldn't forgive? I see... He did a lot of evil... I'll remember this." If you choose to intervene, we see Artyom screw on a new filter on Pavel's mask. The Little One then comments: "He will live. So that's what forgiveness is... Thank you... I'll remember this."

This choice ties in with Metro's morality system. A "morality system" can be defined as "implicit or explicit digital systems within a particular game that morally rate certain player actions and/or choices on the basis of a presupposed ethical framework".[101] This kind of systems, in operation in, for example, games such as Fallout 3 (2008), the Mass Effect series (2007-2012), and Bioshock (2007), can be implicit or explicit. In the first case, the player is unaware of the fact that it is morally judged by the game and is equally unaware of which specific actions are judged by the system. In the latter case, the player is aware of the existence of the system and/or when and how the system is judging, usually with the help of some sort of "morality chart". While morality systems are a well-established game mechanic, they have come under criticism from academic scholars, focusing on the two-dimensional (dualistic) nature of the systems, their selective morality, the inconsistency of the rule systems, and the notion of "ludo-narrative dissonance" (as discussed earlier in this article).[102]

The morality system of the Metro series is implicit. Even though the game gives very subtle feedback to the player (in the form of a light flickering and a soft sound), the player is not explicitly made aware that the game is morally judging its player, when it judges, or what the consequences of the player's choices are. Nevertheless, the game does feature two endings, based on Artyom's/the player's choices throughout the game. Most of those choices revolve around small tokens of mercifulness and kindness, such as killing as few enemies as possible, playing a guitar, releasing prisoners, not raising any alarms, listening to people's conversations, and saving Pavel in his hour of need.

Back to the scene in which Artyom kills or saves Pavel. Before the cutscene and the moral choice, the scene

is chaotic and Pavel's behaviour demands all attention. After the scene, when the player is given its control over Artyom back, there is finally time to look around quietly. Above the cupboard Pavel is leaning against (either dead or alive according to Artyom's/the player's choice), a small, square frame is hung. In the frame, somewhat faded away, an image can be seen. It is an icon of Jesus Christ, as it is so very well-known in the Byzantine and Eastern-Orthodox traditions. It is known as an Acheiropoieton, a thing "made without a hand", that is, it has a divine origin.[103] This specific Christ image has been associated with numerous other, comparable ones, among which the legendary "Veil of Veronica", a Latinisation of the Greek "vera eikon" ("true image") and connected to the legend of a woman cleaning Jesus' face during his walk to Golgotha; the "Image of Edessa", connected to king Abgar and his miraculous recovery from grave illness, and the Shroud of Turin, the alleged burial shroud of Jesus himself.[104] Within the Eastern traditions, icons are not mere tools for catechesis or objects of reverence, but they also form embodiments of the divine mysteries. As Leonid Ouspensky summarizes:

> The Church sees in its holy image not simply one of the aspects of Orthodox teaching, but the expression of Orthodoxy in its totality, the expression of Orthodoxy as such. The icon is one of the manifestations of the holy tradition of the church, similar to the written and oral traditions.[105]

The Christ Icon of Metro Last Light points, on the one hand, to the "whole" of the Christian (Orthodox) tradition with everything it teaches and stands for, but, on the other, it presents "the" Christ in his two natures in their hypostatic union – as defined in the oecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. "The icon of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, is an expression of the dogma of Chalcedon in image", as Ouspensky argues.[106] Even more, in Christian tradition, Jesus Christ is regarded as the imago Dei: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15; NASB20). So, the icon the player finds above Pavel's head is of Jesus Christ, who is the perfect imago Dei.

Icons such as the Acheiropoieton have a special communicative property: they invoke the text-internal reader. Usually, in two-dimensional texts such as paintings and he likes, the text-internal author and reader, even though they are technically present as in any given text, do not show themselves. But in some paintings such as Da Vinci's famous "Mona Lisa", but also in many Christ icons, the main character looks straight "out" of the painting. The only possible recipient of this gaze can be the immanent reader. Of course, an individual text-external reader of the "Mona Lisa" or an Acheiropoieton can or cannot see this gaze and can or cannot

understand that he or she is the one looked to. The internal reader does not have a choice: it is being watched.

Equipped with all this extra knowledge, what does the Acheiropoieton of Metro Last Light signify? Or what does it communicate? I would argue that it can communicate two distinct and contradictory messages to Artyom-cum-the (text-internal) reader-cum-player. This is due to the specific characteristics of video games as a genre. Only in a game, a text can have two contrary meanings in one, the actualisation of either one depending on the decision of the (internal (internal or external) reader. If the player has decided to let Pavel die, the icon on the wall looks unto the player with a negative judgement: you should not have done so. If the player has decided to save Pavel, the icon communicates a positive judgement: you have done well.

If we turn our attention, for a moment, to Luke 6, we find multiple quotes from Jesus' mouth ordering his followers to forgive their enemies.

> But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who are abusive to you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic from him either. (...) But love your enemies and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil people. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:27-29.36-36; NASB20)

Jesus argues that doing good to people who are treating you well, is nothing to be proud of. The sinners do the same.

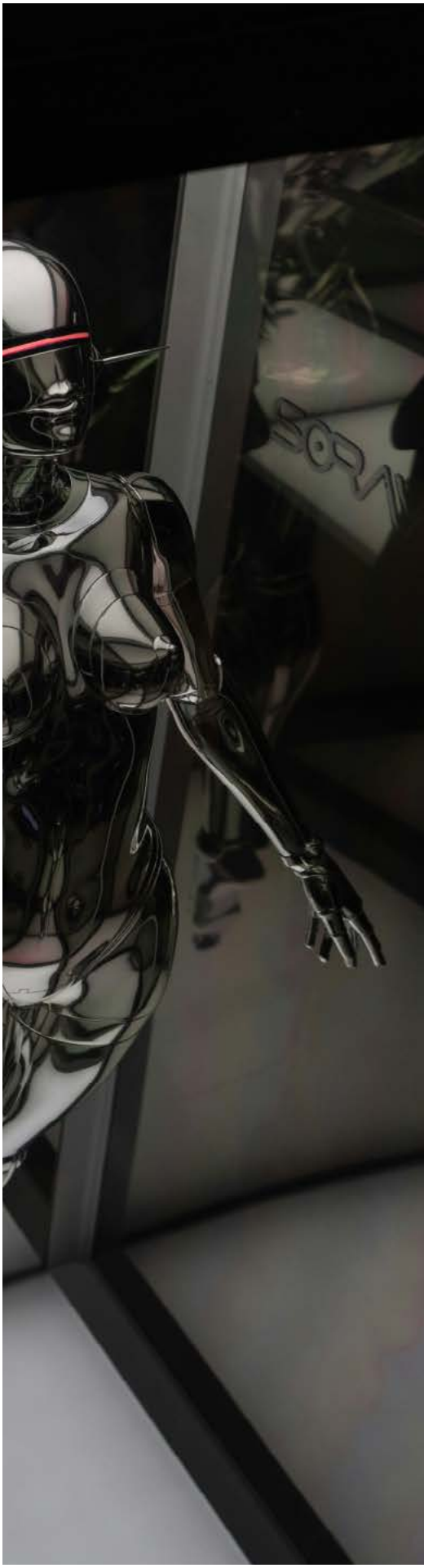
> If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. (Luke 6:32-33; NASB20)

If Artyom/the player has decided to let Pavel die, there is nothing to be proud of. As the Little Dark One remarks: "You couldn't forgive? I see... He did a lot of evil... I'll remember this." But if Artyom/the player decides to save Pavel, you have done something remarkable. The Little One remarks: "He will live. So that's what forgiveness is... Thank you... I'll remember this." You have forgiven your worst enemy, something nobody would have asked you to do. Nevertheless, you did save him. Jesus explicitly asks this from his followers:

> You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may prove yourselves to be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45; NASB20)

What happens if we fuse this all together: the creational narrative, the concept of the imago Dei, and the anti-theodicy of the "Genesis trailer" together with the morality of Pavel's rescue, Jesus' appeal to forgive one's enemies, and the Acheiropoieton above the cupboard? The answer to this question is also the answer to the question if and how Metro Last Light could be interpreted as a locus theologicus, a finding place of God's continuous self-revelation.

Even though any text-external player of Metro Last Light could choose to let Pavel die, the text-internal player knows that the "canonical" choice is to save him. So we will focus on this option. By saving his "worst enemy" Pavel, Artyom has chosen to materialize Jesus' mission to do so. The Christ icon above the cupboard – because of the theology attached to the medium of the icon and its unique communicative property of evoking its text-immanent reader – judges Artyom positively if silently, or rather indirectly by the Dark One's "so this is what forgiveness is". Since Jesus Christ is regarded as the ultimate imago Dei, Artyom, by imitating Christ through his choice, becomes more aligned with his own (creational) identity as an imago Dei. By virtue of this identification, Artyom becomes a vera eikon in and of his own right, the icon of the Metro, that is, the manifestation or even incarnation of the God that was disqualified as having left or even died at the end of the "Genesis trailer". This implies that Artyom becomes a



kind of "Christ" himself, or a "christophoric" figure.

The term "christophoric" is derived from Saint Christophorus.[107] The narrative surrounding Christopher and his "Christ-bearing" role originates from another highly influential source, the Legenda Aurea.[108] This story revolves around a Canaanite man named Reprobus, known for his imposing stature and intimidating appearance. Driven by the desire to serve the "greatest prince in the world", Reprobus embarks on a journey that leads him to encounter three different rulers: a mighty knight, the devil, and ultimately God Himself. However, the quest to find God poses a significant challenge. Eventually, Reprobus encounters a hermit residing in a vast desert. In his fervour to locate Jesus Christ and serve Him, the hermit advises Reprobus to go to a great river and assist travellers in safely crossing it.

As fate would have it, a child approaches Reprobus, asking for his help in crossing the river. During the crossing, the child becomes increasingly heavy to the point where Reprobus is at risk of drowning. Eventually, they reach the opposite shore, where the child reveals itself as "Him who created all the world". This revelation leads to Christopher receiving his name directly from Christ Himself, and he is henceforth known as the "Christ-bearer", derived from the Greek terms christos and pherein. As a result, Christopher becomes the patron saint of travellers and ferrymen.

We continue: back to Metro Last Light. Because of the necessary entanglement between the text-immanent player and its in-game avatar – in casu Artyom – everything that is true for Artyom is true for the player, and vice versa. This means that also the player becomes an incarnation of Christ and therefore a "christophoric player". This means, in its turn, at least theologically, that the act of playing (this scene from) Metro Last Light is a religious act in and of itself. By playing the game, the player manifests its own christophoric quality. This is, of course, necessarily true for the text-internal reader, but not necessarily for the text-external reader. Any individual player of Metro Last Light can or cannot understand this christophoric quality. And if this quality is understood, the external player can still choose to identify him- or herself with the internal reader and therefore Artyom.

This tension between the text-internal reader of the game, understanding its christophoric quality, and a text-external one, that may or may not understand and/or acknowledge this quality resembles an older discussion about the "efficiency" of the sacraments. In the Donatist controversy (4th to 6th century), theologians discussed whether sacraments derive their "effect" by virtue of the sanctity of the one ministering the sacraments to

the faithful.[109] The (retrospectively) heterodox opinion – often summarized by the adage ex opere operantis ("working from out of the worker") – is contrasted with the (equally retrospectively) orthodox position, defended by, among others, Saint Augustin – often summarized as ex opere operato ("working from out of the work"). The first position couples the sanctity of the administer to the operationability of the sacrament, the second one claims that sacraments work in and of themselves, separately from the sanctity (or evilness) of the administer.

If we connect this second "orthodox" position with our communicative hermeneutics we have been using throughout this article, we could make a theological argument that the knowledge and/or intention of the text-external author (in casu the developer 4A Games) is not critical for the theological meaning of the actual text (Metro Last Light) itself. If we extent this ex opere operato to the text-external reader of a game-text, his or her knowledge of what is happening theologically in the text is not critical for the text's efficiency. The individual player of Metro Last Light may or may not understand the game's christophoric quality, but that understanding does not influence whether this text is "working" or not.

4.3 The Exodus to the East

The third instalment of the Metro series, Metro Exodus (2020), takes place in 2035, one year after the events of Metro Last Light and two years after those of Metro. And just as its predecessor, Metro Exodus has some very interesting religious imagery, especially if we look at Exodus through the lens of our theological analysis of the previous game.

In Exodus, Artyom, his wife Anna, her father Miller, and a couple of the Ranger more or less escape the Moscow underground in search of the source of a mysterious radio transmission suggesting that there are other pockets of human survival besides their own. To escape and travel the wide Russian wastelands eastwards, they capture a train called "The Aurora". Eventually, they find the source of the radio transmissions, but even better, they find a beautiful, green mountainous, riverside valley featuring a complex system of caves. This "paradise" is untarnished by the nuclear devastation, a perfect spot to start fresh anew.

The title of the instalments gives the conceptual "key" required to "crack" the game's theology: "Exodus". The book of Exodus is the second of the Torah and its theological importance for the collective (self-)identity of the Jewish people in past and present cannot be overestimated.[110] In Exodus, Israel's God reveals himself as "I am" (Exodus 3:14), liberates his chosen people from captivity in Egyptian slavery, and leads them through

the desert to the Promised Land.[111] God gave them the Ten Commandments, the rules of how to live a morally just and religious pious life, and the Tabernacle, the place of God's dwelling on Earth.[112]

In the context of the aesthetic reinterpretation of the Christian ritual of baptism, it is essential to highlight that, while this further enriches the complexity of the scene, Christian theology has appropriated the biblical imagery of the Israelites' passage through the Reed Sea as a precursor to the Christian sacrament of baptism.[113] The Israelites' crossing of the Reed Sea to liberate themselves from their previous life as slaves is reimagined as a symbolic anticipation of the catechumen's passage through the baptismal waters, symbolizing the abandonment of their former life, which was once dominated by the enslavement of sin.

In Metro Exodus, Artyom takes on the role of both Moses and Jesus Christ in leading his "chosen people" from the slavery of the Metro in Moscow to the new "Promised Land" in the East.[114] "The Aurora", the train, carries them to the East, from Moscow to Siberia. "Aurora" derives from the Latin term for "Morning Star", a concept employed in Christian tradition to symbolize Jesus Christ, who, according to Scripture (1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 2:28; 22:16), metaphorically illuminates the world through His sacrifice on the cross. Notably, the Morning Star appears in the East, forging a connection between the two.[115]

The association between the promised land and paradise is rooted in biblical narratives. The Edenic garden in Genesis 2 evokes the image of the biblical promised land.[116] This connection is actualized in Metro Exodus through Lake Baikal, a designated World Heritage site consisting of three Zapovedniks (a Russian term denoting 'nature conservation area' with connotations of 'sacred' and 'prohibited from disturbance') and two nature reserves. Lake Baikal stands as the largest freshwater reservoir globally and as a vital lifeline for humanity.

Metro Exodus incorporates another biblical reference when the Muscovites discover that they are not the sole survivors of the apocalypse. In the Russian wastelands, other groups exist, including one dwelling in the Yamantau bunker, known as 'the Ark' – a clear allusion to the biblical ark of Genesis.[117] The bunker, despite sustaining damage during the attack, remained structurally sound. Lacking sufficient food reserves due to its incomplete construction, the Ark's inhabitants resorted to cannibalism. The bunker's antennae, initially damaged but later repaired, were used to lure unsuspecting wasteland dwellers for consumption.

The Ark in Metro Exodus holds a dual reference to the biblical book of Genesis. Following Noah's departure from his ark, he enters into a covenant with God, signifying his salvation. This covenant condemns bloodshed,

both human and animal, and permits the consumption of animal flesh without blood. This aspect aligns with the exaggerated issue of cannibalism in the game, mirroring the theme of meat consumption in Genesis. The biblical concept that human beings are created in the image of God, the aforementioned imago Dei, prohibits bloodshed, including the game's depiction of cannibalism.

Viewed from Metro Last Light, in Metro Exodus, Artyom is given roles resembling those of Jesus, Noah, and Moses. Throughout the three instalments, Artyom undergoes a notable transformation. In Metro 2033, Artyom starts as a rather conventional video game hero, lacking distinct characteristics. However, in Metro Last Light, Artyom progressively acquires qualities reminiscent of Christ, exemplified in the "Genesis trailer" and the icon scene. Artyom becomes, what I call, a "messianic hero":

> The messianic hero, who is aesthetically and rhetorically inspired by the messianic or Christ figure from Christian tradition, saves one or more persons, either an individual, a group of individuals, or a collective, from a certain, possibly self-inflicted evil, either personal, institutional, or abstract in nature, (potentially) by freely sacrificing himself or herself.[118]

This development positions Artyom as a Christ-like saviour, embodying traditional Christ-figure attributes such as voluntary self-sacrifice and the extension of forgiveness to his adversaries. Moving into Metro Exodus, Artyom takes on qualities evocative of the biblical figure Moses, leading the oppressed people to a new, paradise-like location, Lake Baikal. In this capacity, he assumes the role of a Moses-like saviour, guiding his people to a sacred land akin to paradise.

"In conclusion, what we have established in this article is the theological possibility of regarding video games as genuine loci theologici of God's continuous self-revelation as Creator, Saviour, and Whole-Maker."

FINAL THOUGHTS

In conclusion, what we have established in this article is the theological possibility of regarding video games as genuine loci theologici of God's continuous self-revelation as Creator, Saviour, and Whole-Maker. We have contextualised this theological view on video games within the broader tradition of cultural theology, that stretches its traditions from Justin the Martyr to the Second Vatican Council. We have defined video games as "ludo-narrative texts, digitally mediated" and focused on their unique communicative property, that is, the necessary entanglement between the text(game)-internal reader(gamer) and it in-game avatar.

Taking the Metro video game series as an illustrative case study of the theoretical framework thus established, we have argued that both the game's protagonist, Artyom, and the game's internal player (entangled as it is with its avatar) become a vera eikon in and of their own right, the icon of the Metro, that is, the manifestation or even incarnation of the God within the game world. This implies that Artyom becomes a kind of "Christ" himself, or a "christophoric" figure. And because of the necessary entanglement between the text-immanent player and Artyom, the player also becomes an incarnation of Christ and, therefore, a "christophoric player". This means, in turn, at least theologically, that the act of playing (this scene from) Metro Last Light is a religious act in and of itself.

There are, however, two considerations that somewhat lessen this very positivist outlook on the theological significance of this game series. First, we have concentrated on one specific scene in Metro Last Light and the general narrative of the said game and Metro Exodus. Even though, in this analysis, some serious theological themes have popped out of the games, it is unavoidable to also pay attention to the fact that in the majority of both games, Artyom/the player are also heavily involved in some serious violence and killing of human and non-human entities. They are, after all, first-person shooters, a genre well-known for its graphic violence. We could argue that the series suffers a kind of ludo-narrative dissonance in this regard.

Secondly, as addressed earlier, the christophoric quality of Artyom/the player may be clear from a text-internal (and intertextual) perspective; this may or may not be the case for an individual text-external reader, that is or is not familiar with the Christian tradition, theology, imagery and/or rhetoric. Even though we have argued in favour of an ex opere operato view on the theological "working" of the game, it is nevertheless important to contemplate this tension between text-internal and text-external reader. In the end, it is rather necessary for this kind of theology to function properly so that at least some text-external readers continue to

be able to understand the theological meaning and significance of this kind of video games. Without external readers – game fans, critics, and scholars alike – there is quite the possibility that the text-internal one will cease to be identified.

BIOGRAPHY

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ENDNOTES

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